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Delta Ecosystem Collapse: California Must Find an Alternative Water Source Say Fishermen

From: Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

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San Francisco, CA - The most important estuary on the west coast of North and South America is in immediate danger of ecological collapse if water diversions are not sharply cut, a commercial fishing organization warned today.

On the heels of a Federal Court decision last Friday in Fresno - ordering a reduction in diversions from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta - the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA) today called on the Governor and Legislature to begin developing alternatives to Delta water in order to save the fish of the estuary and finally provide the state with a reliable water supply.

"Judge Oliver Wanger's ruling should have come as no surprise to anyone who's been paying attention to water and the environment in California," said Pietro Parravano, a Half Moon Bay fisherman who served on the State's Bay-Delta Advisory Committee and was a member of the Pew Oceans Commission. "We were warned twenty years ago - following hearings by the State Water Board - the Delta was being over drafted by an average 1.6 million acre-feet a year.

In recent years that overdraft was probably much higher. Is it any surprise fish populations are collapsing?" asked Parravano.

The fishing group accused California administrations over the past two decades, as well as the Legislature and water leaders, of being in a state of denial, thinking they could continue, or even increase the levels of diversions from the Delta and its tributaries without anyone noticing the destruction to the environment.

"They just kept denying the problem and finding ploys to study away the clear science that estuaries - our most biologically productive water bodies - require freshwater inflow," continued Parravano. "They were no different than the tobacco industry that denied the relationship between smoking and lung cancer, or the oil and coal industries that denied the link between greenhouse gasses and global warming. It's seemed like denial was the biggest river in California."

"It's not just the Delta and longfin smelt that are in trouble here," said Larry Collins, president of San Francisco's Crab Boat Owners Association. "The lower than predicted salmon returns to the Sacramento River last year, when there was almost no fishing, and the poor catches so far this year may mean that the west coast's second largest salmon run - that migrates from the Pacific through the Bay and Delta to the Sierra streams - is also feeling the impact of a collapsing Delta."

In addition to the Central Valley's Chinook salmon, that supplies 90 percent of California's catch and provide the majority of salmon taken offshore Oregon and Washington as well, the Bay and Delta provide one of the largest nursery areas for Dungeness crab, and is home to the largest herring fishery south of British Columbia. The Bay and Delta, too, have historically supported large recreational fisheries for sturgeon, striped bass and shad. PCFFA warns all this could be lost if steps are not taken to save the Delta.

Collins said he welcomed the leadership of the Governor on the water issue, but warned that a peripheral canal and reservoirs are not the answer.

"We need 21st century solutions, not the failed ideas of the 1950's like reservoirs that lose much of their water to evaporation or an isolated canal stealing high quality Sacramento River water from the Delta." Collins had harsh words for the Peripheral Canal, which was first proposed to help save fish nearly 50 years ago when the State was considering barriers in the Delta blocking fish passage. "What we've learned over the years is that the water agencies - and I don't care if they're state or federal - can't be trusted," Collins emphasized. "In 1992 we were promised 800,000 acre-feet of water each year under the Central Valley Project Improvement Act for fish and wildlife. Well we've had to fight each year to get it and often don't and then they [Bureau of Reclamation] steal it in the Delta before it ever gets to the Bay."

Collins continued, "as for the state, it's hasn't even offered to make up its half of the 1.6 million acre deficit. And, you want us to trust them to make releases from a canal for the Delta? Forget it! Once it's in that canal, its headed straight south to the big water contractors on the Westside of the San Joaquin and Southern California."

More than half of all Californians currently depend on the Delta or its tributaries for their drinking water. The Delta's watershed provides the flows to irrigate Central Valley agriculture.

Even without the fishery and environmental concerns, the fishing group warns the Delta is an increasing unreliable water source. Predictions are, with global warming, the Sierra snow pack whose melt provides flow to the Delta will be substantially less. Sea level rise will exacerbate saltwater intrusion into the Delta. Moreover, the fishing group says, the area is vulnerable to a major Earthquake affecting its levies and water delivery infrastructure. Developing alternative sources to the Delta, they say, is the only way to ensure a dependable water supply for the state.

PCFFA's Executive Director, Zeke Grader, who serves on the State's "Delta Vision" Blue Ribbon Stakeholder Committee said the State should look first to the California Water Plan Update

"Providing assistance to communities and agriculture to save water is one of the most effective and least expensive things we can do right now," said Grader. "We don't need expensive reservoirs that will be useless in any kind of prolonged drought, or a \$26 billion dollar Peripheral Canal, euphemistically called an 'isolated facility.'"

Grader said water recycling and reuse is also more cost effective than new reservoirs and a canal and could help to curb sources of polluted runoff. He said reestablishing flood plains, to allow rivers places to go during winter high flows, coupled with incentives for groundwater recharge would be the best way of using nature's "natural storage" - instead of environmentally damaging surface reservoirs that lose supply to evaporation. Groundwater recharge will also help to maintain stream flows.

"Finally," Grader said, "it's time to stop wasting money studying again and again ill-advised reservoirs and canals and invest in research for the development of environmentally friendly desalination systems." The fishermen recommend the state provide seed money to some of its best universities for research to make California the world leader in desalination technology, much as it is doing with stem cell research. Desalination, Grader said, is California's hedge against multi-year droughts - a way to keep water in stream for fish and to maintain flows to farms for prudent irrigation practices.

"We have a huge water resource in our front yard, called the Pacific Ocean," said Grader. "Investing in research we should be able to take water safely from the ocean, utilize solar energy - which is in ample supply in much of the state - to remove the salts from the water, and then develop a use for that salt or safely store it."

The fishing group mentioned beach wells as an example of a safe intake system for desalination plants. They suggested piping seawater inland where there is ample sunlight for solar powered distillation to convert sea water to fresh water. The waste brines they say could then be dried and safely stored, in lieu of potentially toxic discharges back into the ocean. Dual use facilities such as combination wave energy and desalination processes they say should be considered, too, in the mix of alternative water sources.

Parravano concluded for the group, saying, “It’s not enough for California to reduce its carbon footprint, leadership also means preparing for impacts from global warming that we can’t avoid. Part of that is preparedness is water planning. We’re not going to solve California’s water crisis, or save its fish by trying to repackaging bad old ideas calling it ‘thinking outside the box.’ A true solution requires bold vision and leadership. It also requires the ability to understand the basic principle that water is necessary to sustain California’s fisheries and coastal communities.”

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